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San Francisco, CA 94117
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610 Langdon St.
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Maintains a website at www.wisc.edu/uwcc/

The Worker Co-op Guide

A website that includes a state-by-state listing of U.S. worker co-ops at www.bcpl.lib.md.us/%7Eslawrenc/

Mondragon Cooperative Corporation

The legendary Basque organization maintains an English-language website at www.mondragon.mcc.es/

Network of Bay Area Worker Collectives (NoBAWC)

415-974-8985 ext.147

A website at www.nobawc.thecoop.org will soon exist

NO ¹⁵ BOSS NEWS

ISSUE NUMBER ONE JULY 1997

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HERE WE GO AGAIN

Welcome to *No Boss News*, conceived last summer in Chicago at the *Active Resistance* (AR) radical organizing conference. The idea was developed by a focus group that met for several days on "Co-ops, Collectives and Alternative Economics." I (Andrew) volunteered to produce at least the first issue, and back in December I put out *No Boss News* Number Zero (NBN#0) as an announcement to the world that this project existed.

I got a lot of response, including enough contributions to break even on the printing and distribution of NBN#0. Special thanks for their generosity to Sunshine Propane of Port Hadlock WA, and to Mifflin Street Food Co-op of Madison, WI for their generosity. And thank you to everyone else who sent me support, financial or otherwise. This issue is a lot larger, so I will probably have to do some fund-raising; so here's another reminder that donations are welcome. Please send all correspondence to the address on the front cover, or email to amcl@iww.org. Checks should be made out to Andrew McLeod. I would love to keep sending this to everyone I know, but after this issue I will only be sending out copies to worker collectives and those who have written back to me at least once.

The past few months have been very interesting for me, which was a huge distraction from NBN. This distraction took two major forms: The first was simple financial reality. After months of travelling between Sacramento and my various projects in the San Francisco Bay Area, I had to get a job, and that turned out to be more interesting than I had planned. I will expand on that experience later in this issue.

The second part of my little drama was a heavy bout of questioning what am I doing, what is the point of even trying to save the world from itself, and how can cooperative business be revolutionary? This began (not coincidentally) at the conference *Building a Community of Resistance* (BCR), which

And finally, I hope that no one is put off by how I am presently running the show here. I know it is awkward to have this project run so un-cooperatively and I am open to any ideas about how to get other folks involved in producing this. A rotating editorship is possible, but there would be address problems and I have seen that tactic result in long delays in printing for other papers. So for now I guess I am driving this boat.

Once again, NBN's mailing address is on the front cover and I can be reached via email at amcl@iww.org. I hope all is well with everyone out there, and look forward to hearing from you.

SELECTED RESOURCES

John Cline c/o Amaranth Co-operative Enterprises

PO Box 448

Wolfville, NS B0P-1X0

902-542-4002; fax 542-1046

email: jcline@glinx.com

John has listed and surveyed over 100 Canadian worker co-ops, and is extending his study to the U.S. and beyond. He is seeking co-ops to fill out a survey (in French, Spanish or English!) that is available on his website, which is located at www.glinx.com/users/jcline/

Employee-Owned Business Institute

7500 W. Mississippi Ave., Suite E-126

Lakewood, CO 80226

303-369-1617

EOBI has laid the groundwork for a printed directory of worker-cooperatives and has a survey and list of co-ops.

Northwest Cooperative Federation

4201 Roosevelt Wy. NE

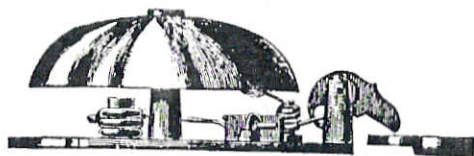
Seattle, WA 98105

206-632-4559

listed and what is the point (i.e. audience) of the directory. At the risk of reinventing the wheel, this topic should be discussed again by anyone attempting to create an organization of co-ops. There will be more on the Directory Team's efforts in the next issue.

A couple of questions that seem most relevant are 1) Can there be non-owner employees (i.e. temps). If so, what rights should non-owners have, and what percentage of workers must be owners? 2) What amount of difference in pay and in authority can exist among the members of the co-op? There are certainly other questions that should be asked and answered, but these are a start. Please feel free to write a few sentences (or pages) on this subject.

Of course, everyone is encouraged to write on any topic at any time, and unless there is a flood of submissions, all will be printed. I also welcome topic suggestions for future issues. In the interest of getting the next issue out more quickly than this one, the deadline will be October 1 for anything to be printed in NBN#2. Also, it was suggested that there should be something to break up pages of type. For example...



But seriously, do people want graphs, cartoons, or what? Lets have a vote on this, in the spirit of democracy. Or just feel free to submit (relevant) images.

took place in San Francisco this spring. Ironically, a conference that, like this paper, was inspired by AR, almost killed this project. I'll spare everyone the details, because this isn't supposed to be a platform for my soul-searching. In any case, BCR was more than just an orgy of cynicism, and here is a more general summary:

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF RESISTANCE

In early April, several hundred people gathered for a long weekend in San Francisco to follow up on the work that was begun at AR last summer. The conference organizers' goal was to discuss concrete plans and projects that could be undertaken in the Bay Area region. At AR there had been a lot of ideas for projects (like NBN) that grew out of discussion groups, but the organizational obstacles presented by thousands of miles between members prevented many from bearing fruit. So by trying to recreate the spirit of AR at a local conference we were learning from our mistakes, which is good. After all, the main problem faced by anarchists and the like is a chronic inability to hold on to gains that we make--The mass movements of the '30s and '70s are primarily fond memories, as the offspring of the flower children smoke cigars, play golf and withdraw into cynical hedonism. I don't mean to discredit those who have gone before us, but clearly we have been losing ground.

A major focus of BCR was maintaining momentum from AR, the largest North American gathering of anarchists in almost a decade, and it seems that we did pretty well: Members of numerous groups and factions and ideological strains got along pretty well for the most part, and big circular discussions of theory were mostly exceptions, rather than the rule. The facilitators did a fantastic job of keeping general assemblies of over a hundred moving, and the smaller group meetings were generally productive. There were conflicts of course, but fewer

than I would expect from that many freaks in one place. The conference successfully brought together a large and unruly group with diverse interests, and provided many with opportunities to compare notes and plan future collaboration.

One feature of the conference was the caucuses, which were modelled after the "Core" sessions of AR. One such caucus was hosted by the Network of Bay Area Worker Collectives (NoBAWC). We had a group of twenty people including representatives from a number of co-ops, some of which have not previously been active in NoBAWC. The discussion started with a general talk about issues faced by various groups. Most interesting was the situation of BookPeople, a book wholesaler: While they are worker-owned, the owners are nearly powerless, and some have begun a campaign to unionize.

Then we had a more structured discussion of what co-ops can do to re-create a movement. We looked at the question of whether to create an association of co-ops, and what form that could take. We also discussed projects that can be undertaken with or without a second-level cooperative--setting up a fund for starting new co-ops, buying some land to serve as a retreat center for workers who need a break and as a potential source of food, and a regular local newsletter. Finally NoBAWC invited all in attendance to come to one of the regular meetings.

Since the conference things have really taken off. NoBAWC meetings are now much larger than before the conference, the agendas are full, and decisions are being made on a regular basis: Within a month there will be a 10% reciprocal discount for members of participating co-ops. Also in the planning stages is a website, to be located at www.nobawc.thecoop.org. And finally, some co-ops may participate in an alternative currency called BREAD. After years of NoBAWC being as much a social as a political group, there is an activist wind blowing. For the Bay Area's cooperatives, *Building a Community of Resistance* is living up to its name.

These questions are intended to spur some dialogue about what sort of concrete efforts can be made to strengthen and expand the co-op movement. While I am suggesting one model, there are many other ideas (a school, conferences etc.) that would be equally useful. Please write in with ideas of your own. It would be especially helpful if we could come up with a way to eventually decide how to make a decision (and exactly who "we" are).

I hope that my research in the belly of the beast will bear fruit someday. Although it is an unlikely source of guidance, we have much to learn from the system we hope to dismantle.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR NO BOSS NEWS?

My main goal for NBN#2 is to have writing by people beside myself. If this is truly going to serve as a means of communication for the movement, it can't just be Andrew cranking out a few pages of rants and updates. While the response from NBN#0 was better than I expected and I made some valuable new contacts, so far I haven't received any submissions of materials for print. So perhaps each issue can have a topic that was announced in the previous issue. So, with that in mind, I would like to suggest a topic for #2:

How do we define a worker co-op?

One of the people that contacted me after receiving NBN#0 was Thomas Gerber of Colorado's Employee-Owned Business Institute. He had been part of a geographically dispersed group that aimed to put out a directory, modelled after the huge and elaborate *Directory of (Intentional) Communities*. The Directory Team fell apart last year for a number of reasons, but one of the issues that they had discussed was that of how to define a worker-cooperative. There are a number of gray areas, and these need to be discussed before a directory can be created. Otherwise, it will not be clear what it means to be

sticky issues of committing to an organization. We also could use nonprofit status, to go after more sources of money.

3) Who should be involved? Obviously, it depends who is interested. But how to decide what is a worthwhile project to fund? If a new co-op isn't a formal workers co-op, some may not want to help out. Perhaps vegetarians, for example, may object to starting a collective butcher shop. There may also be differing opinions on how purely democratic a co-op must be. It is difficult to conceive of anything short of a full decision-making process (whether representative or a direct vote) that could deal with an individual situation. Perhaps we shouldn't worry about hypothetical situations, but one of the historically common mistakes made by co-ops is to figure things out as they go.

4) How long should the trainer's visit be? Three weeks is (barely) enough for an efficient system with vast amounts of capital and extensive support systems to tell a new store how to work. But this obviously doesn't describe the conditions that we can expect. We also need to ask how frequently a new co-op can be developed.

5) Will this tie into a permanent structure? In the long run, this idea will be most easily sustained by a stable structure that includes a system of dues and a paid staff. But setting up such a structure is a huge task even on a regional level, and we would need a high level of interest and commitment to pull it off on a large scale.

6) Can this idea be combined with a parallel project, such as a worker-exchange program? It seems that in exchange for sending a worker to help the co-op in formation, a collective could host and train someone from the new co-op. This trainee could help cover the shifts of the temporarily absent member and perhaps the two could exchange living situations. Such an exchange could also take place between two established co-ops, and would serve as a valuable educational tool.

A LESSON IN REVOLUTION FROM THE MAN

One of my co(-op)-conspirators, John Burnett, has an idea that people who work in collectives for a long time should occasionally get a little refresher course on why we are sitting through all of these damn meetings and such. He calls it a "slavery sabbatical." While I'm not sure I agree that co-ops should make a policy of routinely exiling members into the cold world of wage slavery, I recently learned a lot from my first straight jobs since I joined the co-op movement four years ago. What started as a simple attempt to save some money turned into quite a learning experience

To make things really interesting, I decided to take the worst job I could find; to hang out at gas stations in the hot sun, selling people auto service plans--commission only. It was boring, degrading, mostly solitary work, except for a few mechanics that were good company when I was at their station. But it was a world that I had never experienced before, and I'm glad I got a chance to study the isolation of this sort of work. It provided a stark contrast with the benefits of cooperation that we may take for granted. In any case, this job was made bearable by its short duration; just a (long) few weeks, while I waited for my really interesting job to begin:

This next job was at a new Borders bookstore, which is just about the antithesis of what I am trying to create in the world; it is a rapidly growing chain that engages in many Orwellian practices, from surveillance to Doublespeak. I realize that my taking this job will be controversial, since Borders is the target of a boycott by the Industrial Workers of the World in response to the firing of a union organizer in Philadelphia. I decided not to attempt to organize the Sacramento store, since I was a short-term employee and feel that little solidarity is built by activists who come to a workplace solely to agitate for a union, then leave once it is in place. Besides, Borders isn't a bad job, and

the majority of workers that I encountered are happy there.

But I do not intend to apologize for Borders, as the company provides a vivid reminder of the importance of our struggle for a new society based on liberty and trust, and has forced me to examine what it is like to submit to a workplace that mirrors the increasing control and decreasing privacy and respect found in society at large. Employees have only token input and are required to sign an agreement that they may be fired at will. Policy is made by people that the workers generally never meet. It is possible to rise quickly through the hierarchy, but what a hierarchy it is!

At Borders I not only made contact with like-minded people, but also learned about the chain store juggernauts that are dramatically changing our society, as well as what one looks like from the inside. Borders' proclaimed mission to be "not a chain, but a collection of fine stores, each an integral part of its community" rings a bit hollow; it is Big Business in every sense of the word. But I was surprised by how pleasant it can be; management is quite responsive and willing to please--at least at this new store where there hasn't been time for antagonism to develop (and I do not predict that it will or will not develop). And at times the air of security, excitement and success of an expanding company was so seductive that I found myself being lulled into accepting the overall package, warts and all. That is something that I had never expected.

Its growth rate is one of Borders' most striking traits. While the current rate of forty new stores a year (an increase of 25% in an industry that is experiencing little if any growth in total sales) is excessive, it is this process of relentless expansion that brings me to the point of this article: *The system whereby new Borders stores are opened resembles my original vision for a collective of organizers.*

Of course, there are some major differences, and I want to make clear that what I have in mind is not at all a centralized,

mechanical process like the one at Borders. But I am impressed at their system: There is a position within the company called "trainer," which is someone who has a home store, but spends weeks at a time working on new stores. During the process of opening our store, we had eight or so trainers helping us with everything from shelving to learning the intricacies of the cash register system. The trainers are specialists in opening stores, and they got us up and running in under three weeks.

While the trainers occasionally gave insight on how something was handled at their home store, we were mostly told the official way of doing things. This homogenous, authoritarian side of the training process was a major departure from my vision, but I have long pondered this sort of system. Borders' cookie-cutter technique is not appropriate to the weird world of workplace democracy, but it is a starting point, and brings up some questions:

1) How broad can a system of co-op trainers be? How useful is someone from a printing collective to a new bakery? My hunch is that the organizers could have their own specialties--legal, decision making, outreach, personnel, baking, etc.--but of course a baker will be most useful to a bakery.

2) Who pays? Unlike Borders we have no sugarmama or daddy at the corporate headquarters. While there are fledgling efforts underway in the San Francisco Bay Area to create a second-level cooperative association, and individual co-ops have created autonomous spin-off enterprises, we are a long way from a paid staff that can travel to advise co-ops in formation. I suggest that pledges of support (perhaps \$50) be lined up, and sent whenever there is someone ready to go to where a collective is forming. The money raised from pledges could go toward a travel stipend and spending money, while the host collective could pitch in to provide housing and food. At first this would probably be infrequent enough that a voluntary contribution could be tolerated without getting into the larger,